

Opening Remarks of Chairman Henry Hyde
Full Committee Hearing, “Kosovo: Current and Future Status”
May 18, 2005

The Balkans region has been an area of tremendous concern since the early 1990s. In recent years, the attention of the United States has been diverted to other geo-strategic priorities. However, 2005 is an exceptionally important year for people of the Balkans.

U.S. officials have outlined three main objectives for U.S. policy in southeastern Europe: (1) integrating the region into a Europe whole and free; (2) creating a self-sustaining peace so that NATO can eventually withdraw its military forces; and (3) ensuring that the region does not become a safe haven for organized crime and terrorism.

This Committee has attempted to address the continuing and underlying inadequacies of international policies in the Balkans through a number of hearings since I have been Chairman.

We are sensitive to the situation on the ground, and we must consider how actions of the U.S. Congress are perceived in the region. However, we must continue to ask the ultimate questions about the Balkans if we are to achieve the ultimate goal – which is a region that is free, and safe, and democratic.

Today, the Committee considers the most critical issue in the Balkans: the question of Kosovo.

In 1999, NATO intervened militarily in the former Yugoslavia. It is important and significant to ask why the final status of Kosovo was left undetermined at that time.

The current status of Kosovo is governed by U.N. Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1244, passed in June 1999 at the end of the Kosovo conflict. The resolution authorizes an international military and civilian presence in Kosovo, the duration of which is at the discretion of the U.N. Security Council. The NATO-led peacekeeping force, KFOR (Kosovo Force), is charged with maintaining a secure environment, while the U.N. Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is given the chief role of administering Kosovo on a provisional basis. The resolution provides for an interim period of autonomy for Kosovo of undefined length, until negotiations on the future status of the province take place. UNMIK is tasked with gradually transferring its administrative responsibilities to elected, interim, autonomous government institutions, while retaining an oversight role. In a future stage, UNMIK will oversee the transfer of authority from the interim autonomous institutions to permanent ones, after Kosovo's future status is determined. UNSC Resolution 1244 provides little insight into how the status issue should be resolved, saying only that it should be determined by an unspecified "political process."

Through the leadership of the U.S. administration, in close cooperation with our European allies, the “political process” resolving the status issue has been reenergized and reinvigorated over the past year. The international community will review the current situation and status of Kosovo this summer. A decision will be made about the prospects for final status negotiations perhaps by the end of this year.

The purpose of this hearing today is to assess the current situation in Kosovo, and to consider U.S. administration policy toward Kosovo and its future status. Our witnesses will address important questions about U.S. engagement in the region, the role of the United Nations, the role of the European Union, the participation of the Kosovar people in elections and governing institutions, the relations between government officials in Belgrade and Pristina, the protection of minority groups, the relations between ethnic and religious groups, and the status of religious freedom.

Ultimately, the hard questions have to be asked. Regardless of final status, how long will an international military presence be required in Kosovo territory? Even if Kosovo becomes independent, will that really change the prospects for economic development and international investment in Kosovo? Given the fact that Kosovo does not exist in a vacuum, how would the potential independence of Kosovo affect the region? How will we achieve UN Security Council agreement on a final status resolution?

I think our goal is to ensure that all Kosovars create a future where they can live together in security and freedom. The question is: how do we get there?

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.

At this time, I recognize our distinguished Ranking Democratic Member, Mr. Lantos.